

H:U:G:Project

The H:U:G: Project demonstrates an array of sensory experience, and explores the diverse range of our 'senses' of touch through robotic and performative installation. This projects deals with the intertwined notions of human-to-human and human-to-machine interactions.

'haptic' from Greek haptesthai, or pertaining to touch

Haptic is part of our human multifunctional sense of touch formed by cutaneous, kinesthetic, and haptic sensory systems. The H:U:G:Project aims to introduce a haptic art concept as a hugging reactive dynamic surface.

We do not have only five senses. Touch is both sensory and affective experience. It is in fact our most elusive yet most vital sense. Psychologist J.J. Gibson (1979) argued, we have outward-orientated (exteroceptive) senses and inward-orientated (interoceptive) senses. Proprioception is our awareness of our body's position in space. The vestibular sense is concerned with balance. Kinaesthesia is the sense of movement through space. Mark Paterson writes about these somatic senses in an article 'Haptic Geographies' for *Progress in Human Geography* (2009). These bodily (somatic) senses inform our perception of 'inside' and 'outside', of inner and outer space. Rather than discrete and separate, these senses act in concert to help give us our embodied perceptions of space. Touch is not only of the skin surface, but also involves the tactile-muscular and tactile-kinaesthetic senses, and these are inherently spatial. The notion of 'haptic space' is not based purely on touch alone, nor on the duality between toucher and touched. It is 'an orientation to sensuality as such that includes all senses' as Iris Marion Young in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (1990) phrases it. Following French philosopher Luce Irigaray, Young states: Touch immerses the subject in fluid continuity with the object, and for the touching subject the object reciprocates the touching, blurring the border between self and other..

Our perception has a multi sensory nature, and yet we engage with the world proximally through touch, rather than merely encounter it in distanced, abstracted vision alone. After art historian Alois Reigl's haptic/optic distinction, Deleuze & Guattari also widen the definition of haptic space in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), implying the ability to communicate or evoke touch by other means. Touch is the first sense to develop in the womb, yet often it is overlooked. Surface, volume, density and weight are not optical phenomena. 'Man first learned about them between his finger and the hollow of his palm. He does not measure space with his eyes but with his hands and feet. The sense of touch fills nature with mysterious forces'. Focillon, Henri (1989) *The Life of Forms in Art*.

Problems of touch and tactility run as a continuous thread in philosophy, psychology, medical writing and representations in art, from Ancient Greece to the present day. Taking a broadly phenomenological framework that traces tactility from Aristotle's aisthesis through the Enlightenment to the present

day, from the tactile therapies of Eastern medicine through touch in social interaction to the virtual tactility of cyberspace, the aesthetic encounter with the installation causes us to experience a set of embodied perceptions that highlight the unitary basis of the sensations, and particularly of touch and space. These encounters do not involve solely the senses of sight, hearing and touch but also, in the approach and the navigation in front of the wall, the haptic senses generally, thereby including tactile-muscular, proprioceptive and vestibular senses in the encounter with installation. Something that accommodates the complexity of sensuous experience lies in the interaction of body and the installation not only in the immediacy of the physical encounter, but the layerings and unfolding of sensory phenomena that come from body memory into the world as we perceive it. It is in the interactions of the past, of both being touched and touching, that allow us to project forward, to make investments in perceived spatiality, in the present. What Henri Bergson, via philosopher Deleuze (1991), would term the collapse from 'virtuality' into 'actuality'.

Installation itself is a wall long 4 meters, and high 2 meters. The wall, wrapped in textile texture, agreeable at touch, is slightly bended and curved at its frontal surface, hiding robotic construction at the back. Two pairs of the 'sleeves' are positioned at the front. There are robotic arms in one pair of the sleeves. Second pair is a wrap for the performer's arms. Both pairs of sleeves are looking similar, and it is not possible to determine by sight what is in them. Types of the interactions (types of the touch and/or hug) are different and hard to predict (depend on the AI algorithm or performer's will). Concept of the interaction relies on the strength and importance of the touch and hug. Our senses interact in embodied experience of the installation. Interaction (touch, hug) in this project is poetically symbolic and therapeutically efficient.

We are suffering in our society from a sad condition best described as touch deprivation, skin hunger and hug inhibition. We need to recognize that every human being has a profound physical and emotional need for touch. Scientific research supports the theory that stimulation by touch is absolutely necessary for our physical as well as our emotional well-being. Various experiments have shown that touch can make us feel better about ourselves and our surroundings, have a positive effect in a child's development and IQ, and can cause measurable physiological changes in the touchers and the touché. Our skin is the antennae that feels, touches, contacts the world. With touch, we meet the world outside of ourselves in a vibrant, alive, nourishing way. With hug and touch we meet, connect, bond, belong.

'Hugging is healthy. It helps the body's immune system, it keeps you healthier, it cures depression, it reduces stress, it induces sleep, it's invigorating, it's rejuvenating, it has no unpleasant side effects, and hugging is nothing less than a miracle drug'.

Kathleen Keating Schloessinger, 'Hug Therapy' (2005)

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